



THE ROLE OF CUSTOMER SERVICE REVIEW AND RATINGS IN SHAPING BRAND  
PERCEPTION AND PURCHASING DECISIONS OF PROSPECTIVE CUSTOMERS IN THE  
HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY IN GHANA.

BY

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## DECLARATION

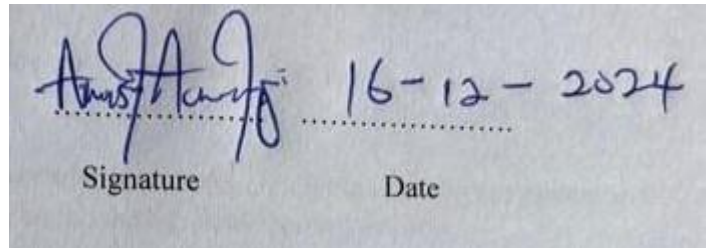
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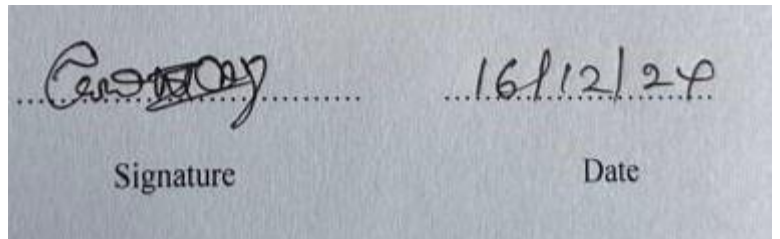
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### CERTIFICATION BY SUPERVISOR

This Dissertation has been prepared and presented under my supervision according to the guidelines for supervision and formatting of Dissertation laid down by the University of Media, Arts and Communication, UniMAC.

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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this dissertation to God who has given life to see this work completed.

To my family for their utmost support and inspiration in challenging times. Your resilience and belief in me have made this possible.

This is for you.

Thank you

## **ABSTRACT**

This study presents an analysis of the role of customer service review and ratings in shaping brand perception and purchasing decisions of prospective customers in the hospitality industry in Ghana. The study specifically sought to address the following research question: to explore how customer service reviews and ratings shape consumer's perception of hotel brands in Ghana, to assess how brand perception built through customer service reviews influence consumer purchasing decision, and to understand the factors that influence consumers' interpretations of customer service reviews and ratings. The study probes two major theories: Social Proof Theory and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM).

The study employs a qualitative research approach to explore how customer service reviews and ratings influence customers' brand perception and purchasing decisions within the hotel industry, and also, utilized interviews to capture insights on customer service review and ratings from customers of the African Regent Hotel, Kempinski Hotel, Best Western Plus, Oak Plaza Hotels and La Villa Boutique Hotel. 10 customers were interviewed through purposive sampling. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the interview data. The results of the study established customer reviews and ratings as the most critical component of customer behavioral conception in the hotel industry in Ghana and further enumerates several factors that influence consumers' interpretations of reviews, such as the consistency, detail, authenticity, and recency of feedback.

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# CHAPTER 1

## CONTEXTUALISATION OF THE STUDY

### 1.1 Chapter Introduction

The first chapter sets an opening to the study, presenting the background of the study, the problem statement, research questions and objectives, the scope of the study, the significance of the study, the organization of work, and finally the chapter summary, which provide a brief overview of the chapter.

### 1.2 Background

The introduction of the Internet brought about a new form of web communication (eWOM), which facilitates offering and sharing information between service providers and consumers as well as between consumers and has become increasingly influential in shaping brand perception and purchasing decisions. With the rise of online platforms and social media, prospective customers often rely on customer service reviews and ratings to gauge the quality of services and the overall experience offered by hospitality establishments. Chan (2020) in a study stated that 60% of consumers consider ratings and reviews important when researching products. Common online platforms used for a specific product review and rating are *trip.com* and *tripadvisor.com*. Customer service reviews and ratings are powerful indicators of brand performance and reliability, influencing how prospective customers perceive and interact with a brand. Positive reviews and high ratings can encourage brand trust and credibility, while negative feedback can tarnish reputation and deter potential customers (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006). Consequently, understanding the dynamics of customer service reviews and their impact on brand perception and purchasing decisions has become imperative for businesses seeking to thrive in today's competitive

marketplace. The significance of customer service reviews extends beyond mere evaluations of product quality or service delivery; they encompass the entirety of the customer experience, encompassing interactions with frontline staff, responsiveness to enquiries, and resolution of issues (Smith et al., 1999). These reviews not only reflect the quality of services provided but also serve as a barometer of brand authenticity and commitment to customer satisfaction. Moreover, positive reviews can cultivate favorable impressions of a brand, positioning it as trustworthy and customer-centric, while negative reviews can raise doubts about brand reliability and competence (Wirtz et al., 2013). Consequently, the cumulative effect of customer service reviews contributes significantly to the overall brand image and reputation, influencing consumer attitudes and behaviors. In addition to shaping brand perception, customer service reviews also exert a profound influence on the purchasing decisions of prospective customers. Studies have shown that consumers often rely on peer recommendations and online reviews when making purchasing decisions, with positive reviews serving as a key driver of purchase intent (Anderson et al., 1994). Conversely, negative reviews can deter potential customers, leading to lost sales and damage to brand equity. In light of the pivotal role played by customer service reviews in shaping brand perception and purchasing decisions, businesses need to understand the underlying mechanisms and dynamics at play. By analyzing the impact of customer service reviews on consumer attitudes and behaviors, companies develop strategies to enhance customer satisfaction, cultivate positive brand perceptions, and ultimately drive sales. Therefore, this research seeks to delve deeper into the role of customer service reviews and ratings in shaping brand perception and influencing the purchasing decisions of prospective customers in the hospitality industry.

## **1.2 Problem Statement**

In the contemporary business landscape, where competition is fierce and consumer choice abundant, the role of customer service reviews and ratings in shaping brand perception and influencing purchasing decisions has emerged as a critical area of inquiry. Customer service, once viewed as a mere transactional facet of business, has now become a pivotal component of the overall brand experience. With the advent of online review platforms and social media, consumers have unprecedented access to information about a brand's customer service performance, enabling them to make informed decisions based on the experiences of others (Lee et al., 2008). In recent years, more consumers are now willing to rely on eWOM, such as customer reviews, as a key source of information about specific products (Litvin et al., 2008). Thus, understanding eWOM is especially important for those products whereby consumers potentially obtain information (search), book, or buy online, such as hotels, airlines, and restaurants. However, businesses acknowledge the importance of maintaining a positive online reputation and leveraging customer feedback to drive sales, but many struggle to effectively manage customer reviews and translate them into actionable insights (Wirtz et al., 2013). Notwithstanding the recognition of the importance of eWOM, previous scholars in tourism and hospitality have mainly investigated the effect of online consumer reviews on two facets: predicting product sales (Ye et al., 2011) and the consumer decision-making process (Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009). These studies consistently found that the characteristics of online reviews (i.e., star ratings, review richness, and valence of reviews) (Sparks & Browning, 2011) and of review providers (i.e., identity disclosure and level of expertise) (Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009) have positive influences on customer purchase decisions. However, no research attempts to study the role of customer service reviews and ratings in shaping brand perception and purchasing decisions of prospective customers in the hotel industry in Ghana.

Therefore, this study aims to fill the gap in the literature by investigating the role of customer service reviews and ratings in shaping brand perception and influencing the purchasing decisions of prospective customers in the hospitality industry in Ghana.

### **1.3 Research Objectives**

1. To explore how customer service reviews and ratings shape consumer's perception of hotel brands in Ghana.
2. To assess how brand perception built through customer service reviews influence consumer purchasing decisions.
3. To understand the factors that influence consumers' interpretations of customer service reviews and ratings.

### **1.4 Research Questions**

1. How do customer service reviews and ratings influence consumer perception of hotel brands in Ghana?
2. How does the brand perception built through customer service reviews influence consumers' purchasing decisions of the hotel industry in Ghana?
3. What factors influence how consumers interpret customer service reviews and ratings?

### **1.5 Scope of the Study**

The study focuses on the role customer service reviews play in shaping brand perception and purchasing decisions in the hospitality industry in Ghana. It draws upon qualitative data from interviews with some selected customers of African Regent Hotel, Kempinski Hotel, Best Western Plus, Oak Plaza Hotels and La Villa Boutique Hotel. The study attempts to provide insight into

how customer service reviews and ratings help shape brand perception and influence customer purchasing decisions.

### **1.6 Significance of the Study**

The significance of studying the role of customer service reviews and ratings in shaping brand perception and purchasing decisions of prospective customers lies in its implications for both academia and industry. Academically, this research contributes to the advancement of knowledge in the fields of marketing and consumer behavior by providing empirical evidence on the intricacies of customer service feedback and its impact on brand perception and purchasing decisions. By exploring the underlying mechanisms through which customer service reviews influence consumer attitudes and behaviors, this study enhances theoretical understanding and lays the groundwork for further research in this area (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006). From a practical standpoint, the findings of this study offer actionable insights for businesses seeking to optimize their customer service strategies and enhance their online reputation management practices. By understanding the factors that drive consumer interpretations of customer service feedback and how it shapes brand perception and purchasing decisions, businesses can develop targeted interventions to improve customer satisfaction, cultivate positive brand perceptions, and ultimately drive sales (Wirtz et al., 2013). Additionally, by identifying variations in perception and behavior across different demographic segments, businesses can tailor their marketing strategies to better resonate with specific consumer groups, thereby maximizing the effectiveness of their customer service efforts (Lee et al., 2008).

## **1.7 Organization of the Study**

The study is organized into five chapters, each serving a specific purpose to enhance clarity and structure. Chapter one functions as the introduction, providing background information, stating the problem, and outlining objectives, among other things. Chapter two is dedicated to the literature review. It discusses the study's theoretical and conceptual frameworks and extant empirical works to situate the study in the broader literature on customer service reviews and ratings. Chapter three thoroughly explores the methodology, explaining the research design, data collection, and analysis methods. In chapter four, the results and analysis of the collected data are presented, followed by a comprehensive discussion of the findings. Finally, chapter five concludes the study by summarizing key points, offering recommendations, acknowledging the study's limitations, and suggesting directions for further research. This well-organized approach ensures coherence and facilitates comprehension for readers.

## **1.8 Chapter Summary**

Chapter one provides a general introduction to the research topic, focusing on the role of consumer service reviews and ratings and their impact on the perception of the brand and consumer purchasing decisions. The background of the study provides a detailed discussion on customer service review and rating influence on brand perception and purchasing decisions. The problem statement is also presented in this chapter, highlighting the research gap, which is that no study has been done on how customer service reviews and ratings shape brand perception and influence purchase decisions in Ghana's hotel industry. The research questions and objectives were duly detailed to serve as guidelines for the study. The scope of the study focuses on the role customer service reviews play in shaping brand perception and their resulting influence on consumer purchasing decisions in the hospitality industry in Ghana, as well as being limited to customers of

the African Regent Hotel. Following this, the significance of the study emphasized providing valuable information to contribute to academic research in this field of studies and also being relevant to industry operators. Lastly, the chapter finally concluded by giving an overview of the structure of the study.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

The chapter comprehensively explores the theories underpinning the study, delving into relevant scholarly research to elucidate key concepts. It encompasses a theoretical framework, conceptualizations, and a thorough review of existing empirical literature, collectively contextualizing the current study within the broader academic discourse.

#### **2.2 Conceptual Review**

This section delves into the concepts that build the study. It provides a deep understanding of concepts and related literature

##### ***2.2.1. Customer Service Reviews***

Customer service reviews are an important touch point where customers provide feedback about their experience after a purchase. This is usually done through the Internet, social networking sites, or direct feedback mechanisms. These reviews have emerged as one of the most significant forms of user-generated content, influencing brand perception and decisions. As Mudambi & Schuff (2010) explained, online customer reviews are a source of relevant information for prospective consumers to assess product or service quality and help make purchase decisions. Digital word-of-mouth is an important means for companies to understand their customers' level of satisfaction and to take strategic corrective measures. Customer service reviews bear more influence regarding the credibility and visibility of sites where they have been shared. According to studies, positive reviews tend to build up customers' confidence in a brand, while negative feedback tends to dent trust and loyalty in the company. Reviews with detailed narratives on customer experiences often

give richer insights compared to just star ratings, which some consumers find inadequate for making decisions.

### ***2.2.2 Brand Perception***

Brand perception refers to a general impression or image that customers develop about a brand through their experiences and interactions. These wide-ranging factors can influence brand perception, such as marketing efforts, product quality, customer service, and, of great importance, customer feedback. Brand perception is dynamic; the perceptions of customers may change with their new experiences or new information they receive, such as customer reviews regarding customer service. According to Keller, 1993, brand perception is the pivotal factor that determines the brand equity differential value or advantage that a product or service has because of its brand name. Positive customer service reviews favorably create brand perception by an assurance that indeed the company can keep its promises; it would mean to trust the brand and creating brand loyalty. On the contrary, negative feedback, upon repetition, influences brand perception negatively and reduces customer loyalty, hence decreasing brand equity. According to Aaker (2012), it has also been established that customers are most likely to interact and keep on interacting with those brands for which strong and positive perceptions have been created; this is particularly true when such feedback meets their expectations. This is in agreement with what Chung & Buhalis (2008) established.

### ***2.2.3. Purchasing Decisions***

A purchasing decision is the very end of a consumer's evaluation process, at which they finally decide to buy a product or service. The major stages of this decision-making process include

problem recognition, information search, alternative evaluation, purchase, and post-purchase evaluation. Customer service reviews have a great effect on these processes, mainly within the stages of information search and evaluation. Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior is an effective framework that explains how brand perception is influenced by a buying decision. Based on this theory, it can be stated that consumer attitude regarding a brand is influenced by feedback and reviews, which leads to planned or intended action. If the consumers perceive the brand positively, they are likely to make a purchase. On the other hand, negative reviews may lead to hesitation or denial from consumers in purchasing the product or service. Moreover, consumers often make purchasing decisions based on perceived risk; customer reviews in turn offer a way to minimize risk (Ward, 2008).

#### ***2.2.4 Trust and Credibility***

Meanwhile, trust and credibility are those aspects highly influenced by customer reviews for brand perception. Trust refers to a consumer's belief in a brand's capability to reinforce promised expectations, whereas credibility generally refers to the perceived reliability and veracity of communication and actions by the brand. Both trust and credibility will be developed over time through consistent positive interactions with a brand, including customer service. Empirical research by Godes & Mayzlin (2004) showed that online customer reviews are important in developing brand credibility since they show social proof of how a brand performs. Upon seeing positive reviews, prospective customers believe in a brand more and find it credible. Negative reviews normally lower perceived credibility if the brand does not respond effectively to complaints. Besides, reviews for authenticity, whether through verified buyers or credible sources, are a good cause for trust; fake ones usually bring about reputational damage.

### **2.3 Literature Review**

With the advancement of digital platforms, much has changed in the consumer's interaction with brands and decision-making process, especially for the tourism and hospitality industries. Several studies have been conducted on how online reviews influence consumer behavior, including studies by Vermeulen & Seegers (2009), Sparks and Browning (2011), and Duan et al., (2008). These studies explored how online reviews affect consumer behavior and provided insights into how online feedback affects booking intentions of a hotel, building trust among consumers, and decision-making processes.

Study by Vermeulen & Seegers (2009) investigated how online reviews affect customer's consideration of a hotel. The study emphasized that online reviews have the potential to make less known hotels more visible and appealing, thereby impacting the customer consideration sets. The results showed that exposure to positive and negative reviews influences hotel consideration, with positive reviews linked to higher customer interest. The study again highlighted how online platforms democratized hotel marketing by creating equal opportunities for both well-established and less-known hotels. Vermeulen & Seegers (2009) effectively demonstrated how online reviews have the potential to enhance the visibility of hotels and consumers consideration. Also, the experimental design employed by the study has been useful, but its lacked depth on the long-term impact that these reviews have on customer loyalty and brand perception.

Furthermore, Sparks & Browning (2011) explored the online reviews and their effect on consumer perceptions of trust and intention to book hotels. The findings indicated that the tone, content, and consistency of the reviews themselves have a great bearing on perceptions of trust. Positive reviews were found to enhance trust in the hotel and the likelihood of booking, while negative reviews diminished trust. The study also emphasized the importance of review volume and

recency, showing that consumers tend to have more trust in hotels with more reviews and recent comments. Although Sparks & Browning (2011) offered a robust exploration on the effect of trust on booking intentions, their incorporation of reviewer credibility added considerably to the growing literature. However, their study could have expanded by including the role of the review platforms, such as TripAdvisor and Google Reviews, in shaping trust. The reliance on survey data is also limiting, as self-reported intentions do not always translate into actual booking behavior.

In contrast to, Duan et al., (2008), who conducted an empirical investigation using panel data to assess the impact of online reviews on sales performance. The study focuses on the overall effect of review volume and valence. Their findings indicated that the volume of reviews was a greater determinant of sales performance compared to the overall positivity or negativity of the reviews. This indicates that consumers are influenced not only by the quality of feedback but also by the quantity of reviews, which serves as an indicator of a hotel's popularity and credibility. Duan et al., (2008) gave an elaborate review based on quantitative analysis and emphasized the impacts of both review volume and valence on the consumer. However, their holistic focus on a number of industries weakened their results with respect to the particular industry of hospitality. While they emphasized the significance of review volume, no explanation is given regarding the psychological mechanisms of how consumers process a high volume of reviews or how review overload could result in decision fatigue.

Moreover, each of these studies emphasize the role played by online reviews for decision-making consumer behavior, yet they approaches the topic from a distinct methodological perspectives. A key difference lies in the methodologies they employed to carry out their various studies. Vermeulen & Seegers used an experimental design, Sparks & Browning conducted surveys, and Duan et al. made use of panel data analysis. The diversity in methodology underlines different

aspects of online review influence. For example, Vermeulen & Seegers measured consumer consideration in controlled conditions, while the survey by Sparks & Browning allowed insight into trust and intentions, and the panel data of Duan et al. provided concrete evidence of the effects on sales. Despite these differences, the common thread across the studies is that positive reviews drive action among consumers, even as negative reviews may differ in the magnitude of their impacts. Interestingly, only Sparks & Browning (2011) deeply examined the role of credibility as a key factor in online review influence in today's digital landscape characterized by a proliferation of fake reviews and bots. These studies have, consequently, shed light on how online reviews shape consumer behavior in the hospitality industry, however, there are still gaps established in the existing literature by this review. No study specifically investigated how these different online review platforms, for example, TripAdvisor, Booking.com, and Google Reviews, may have different influences on consumer purchasing behavior and perception. This is important, as consumer confidence and engagement may be quite different given the type of platform used.

## **2.4 Empirical Review**

Online reviews have become an indispensable source in the decision-making process of customers, particularly in the hotel industry, where every buyer wants to rely on the opinions of other customers before making a purchase. There are several studies conducted that focused on how online reviews affect consumer behavior, the performance of hotels, and the perception of trust. According to Vermeulen & Seegers (2009), positive reviews raise the likelihood of consideration of consumers for a particular hotel. Their findings showed that positive reviews built a positive image, which encouraged consumers to make a hotel reservation; however, negative reviews did the opposite and had an asymmetrical effect: potential consumers would not make reservations because of negative reviews. This finding supports the concept that negative information has a

greater salience than positive information when decisions are made, thus making online review management even more crucial for businesses (Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009).

On the other hand, Sparks & Browning (2011) confirm that positive reviews increase intentions to book but also enhance the perceived trustworthiness of the hotel. The authors have emphasized hereby how online reviews establish consumer trust. In cases of negative reviews, trust will be lower, suppressing the consumers' intentions to make bookings, which substantially affects the performance of the business outcomes. This has also been reiterated by Duan et al., (2008), who argued that reviews are a form of social proof that assists consumers in decision-making. When consumers are undecided, they utilize the experiences of others to validate their decisions, demonstrating how crucial online reviews are in guiding decisions over what to buy. Filieri & McLeay (2014) extend this stream of research by suggesting that a variety of factors, such as perceived review credibility, review content quality, and overall rating, are critical factors in shaping perceptions. Their findings also show that people are more likely to adopt information in reviews to the degree they perceive those reviews as trustworthy and informative. This means that quality and credibility are what matter in reviews, and not all reviews are equal when it comes to driving consumer behavior. Proactive online review management and accuracy of content can drive positive hotel performance indicators such as occupancy rate and revenue per available room. Again, Xie et al. (2014) emphasize that active engagement in review sites in a manner that necessitates fast and professional responses to negative reviews can reduce the negative impact of such reviews. This practice will, in turn, allow the firm to uphold a good online reputation and improve overall performance. Their study underlines that high-quality service is a significant predictor of customer satisfaction, which in turn leads to positive reviews. Positive feedback boosts the chances of booking in the future, thereby creating a self-feeding cycle of better service leading

to higher customer satisfaction and, consequently, more business. Such an argument is further entrenched by Luca (2016), where it is established that higher ratings across review platforms ensure greater revenues. What his findings have set in place is that a strong online reputation leads to business success, whereby higher ratings merely act as signals to customers that they will get quality. This may imply that firms with strong online reputations yield customer interests at high levels and translate into the financial success of the firms themselves. The results of such studies have a series of significant implications not only for the hospitality industry but also for all other industries that rely on consumer service.

In addition, the great power of online reviews on both customer behavior and confidence presumes the necessity of active online presence management by every business. Positive reviews build trust and drive booking intentions, while negative reviews have an inordinately greater impact on driving customers away from the business. Therefore, with a view to long-term success, it is incumbent that the standards of service be kept high to incentivize positive reviews. Furthermore, the results of Filieri & McLeay (2014) indicate that credibility and quality are integral features in reviews to arrive at a consumer decision, which thus suggests that not only should businesses seek reviews, but they have to make sure there is a high level of trustworthiness in their feedback. In this way, it would imply that fake or manipulated reviews may have adverse implications and could undermine consumer trust. This means businesses that wish to capitalize on the power of social proof have to make sure reviews are authentic and detailed. It is this proactive engagement that Xie et al. (2014) and Kim et al. (2015) reiterate as a rapid business response to customer reviews availed in a timely and professional manner. Proper engagement limits the adverse impact of negative reviews on a business and boosts its overall performance. For example, professional

responses to negative reviews repair the broken trust and further inform other customers that this business values feedback and is committed to making things right.

Another clear financial implication for businesses, as found by Luca 2016, is that higher ratings mean increased revenue. A good online reputation develops not only consumer perception of the business but also brings tangible business outcomes in the form of increased occupancy and revenue generation. In essence, therefore, maintaining a good online reputation should be one of the top agendas for any hotel business since it directly affects their bottom line. Empirical evidence, therefore, underlines the now increasingly important function that online reviews serve to shape consumer behavior, trust, and, for that matter, business performance. Undoubtedly, a judiciously crafted strategy of review management, quality service, and response to the feedback of customers is crucial to improving perceptions of brands, building trust, and attaining maximum financial performance. All this makes e-review management one of the most important ingredients in business strategy for a firm in the digital marketplace today.

## **2.5 Theoretical Framework**

This section explores theories associated with the subject matter to ascertain their importance to the study. The study delves into two major theories: Social Proof Theory and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM).

### ***2.5.1 Social Proof Theory***

Social Proof Theory, introduced by Robert Cialdini in his 1984 book *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*, is one of the fundamental concepts developed to understand human behavior, especially in a situation of uncertainty. Cialdini argued that people tend to act like others when they are uncertain, particularly if they perceive others as knowing better (Cialdini, 1984). The theory suggests that people use the behavior of others to determine and guide their actions, making

it relevant in the fields of marketing, psychology, communication, and even public health. In the context of hotel selection, customer reviews and ratings serve as a form of social proof.

Cialdini's work built upon earlier research in social psychology that explored how group behavior influences individual decision-making. Since the conceptualization of the Social Proof Theory, many studies have applied it within various contexts. For example, in the context of marketing, it has been established that social proof is an effective way of influencing the actions of consumers. In one such study, Senecal & Nantel (2004) established that online product reviews and customer ratings generally influence consumer purchasing decisions, stating consumers are much more likely to trust products that have a large number of positive reviews.

Similarly, De Vries et al., (2012) have established that social proof expressed on social media is denoted by the number of likes, shares, and comments that directly influence user engagement. One of the key strengths of social proof theory is its simplicity and wide applicability. The theory provides an uninterruptedly simple explanation of a very common social phenomenon, thus making it comprehensible and accessible. Its versatility allows this theory to be applied in a wide range of contexts from consumer behavior to public health and political communication.

In addition, the theory has been underpinned empirically in many studies. For example, the influence of online reviews and customer testimonials affects the decisions of other customers. (Senecal & Nantel, 2004; De Vries et al., 2012). Another strength of the theory is the ability to explain behavior in situations of uncertainty. When people are uncertain about what they should do, they are likelier to follow what others are doing because they assume other people may have better knowledge of the situation. When generalized from that idea, one can notice how the

marketing world applies this principle to stimulate action by consumers, such as providing the numbers of people who have bought the product and recommending the service.

Despite the strength of the theory, there are also notable limitations. The one major weakness is the vulnerability of manipulation. For example, digital marketing allows every business to easily fake reviews, inflate social media likes, or fabricate a testimony just to create an illusion in terms of social proof; it is the manipulation that leads people to make decisions based on some wrong or misleading information (Anderson & Simester, 2014). Studies have found that fake online reviews on websites such as Amazon and Yelp have significant influences on consumer purchases even if the reviews lack credibility.

To complement the shortcomings of the social proof theory, the study seeks to interview customers to validate the authenticity of the social proof theory. As Social Proof Theory involves several factors that explain why and how people are influenced by others. First of all, uncertainty is the major factor; when individuals are unsure about how to behave, they are more likely to follow the actions of others (Cialdini, 1984). Second, similarity also plays a role, as individuals are more likely to be influenced by those they consider to be similar to themselves. Senecal & Nantel, (2004) argues that consumers are more likely to trust product reviews provided by users with similar preferences and experiences.

Another factor is the number of people exhibiting a certain behavior. According to Cialdini, (1984), the more people engage in certain behaviors, the more likely a person is to do the same; the assumption is that the behavior is socially acceptable or desirable. Additionally, the credibility of the source of social proof is essential, to the extent that if people perceive the source as credible and competent, they are more likely to follow the recommended behavior (De Vries et al., 2012).

Finally, action observability is a significant factor for social proof to occur when people can easily observe the behavior of others, such as seeing many positive reviews about a product; they are more likely to engage in the same behavior.

### ***2.5.2. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)***

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) is described as the dual-process nature of persuasion in people via two separate routes of information processing. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) was propounded by Richard E. Petty and John Cacioppo in 1980 (Wagner & Petty, 2022). The theory emerged from previous research on persuasion and attitude formation and incorporated cognitive and social psychology perspectives. It posits that people process persuasive information either via a central route or a peripheral route, depending on their motivation and ability to engage with the content. The central route to persuasion involves careful consideration of information provided on content and is usually used when individuals are highly motivated and able to process the volume of information at their disposal (Alnawas, 2024). This may lead to lasting changes in individuals' attitudes. The peripheral route is heavily dependent on superficial cues, which include the attractiveness of the spokesperson or emotional appeal presented or leveraged in the content, especially when people are less motivated or able to process the message presented to them through marketing communications. ELM became the touchstone for addressing how and why people change their attitudes or make decisions, particularly in marketing, advertising, and communications. ELM has been the root of many studies since it was recognized. Marketing uses the model to analyze consumer responses to advertising messages. In a study by MacKenzie and Lutz (1989), they observe that a consumer who is highly motivated to buy a certain product processed ads through the central route, leading to stronger and longer-lasting attitude changes.

On the other hand, when motivation was low, peripheral cues were relied upon by consumers for their attitudes toward a certain product to be affected, such as celebrity endorsements or products packaged in a certain way. Furthermore, one strength of the Elaboration Likelihood Model is its flexibility. The theory recognized that people are not always motivated or capable of deeply processing information, hence providing another route for attitude change if deep engagement is not possible. This makes ELM useful within the design of persuasive messages for different audiences since communicators can design methods according to whether they expect their audience to elaborately process the message. (Petty & Cacioppo, 2012). Another strength of the ELM is the empirical support across a wide range of studies. Studies have found that individuals who process persuasive messages through a central route are more likely to develop strong, longer-lasting attitudes that are more resistant to counter-persuasion. Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann (1983) highlighted that people who had been motivated to process a message deeply retained their attitudes longer and were less swayed by contradictory information. Second, ELM considers that not all decisions or attitudes are developed by deep cognitive processing. The theory acknowledges that people often rely on simple cues, such as the popularity of a product or the endorsement of an expert when they are not invested in the decision-making process (Petty et al., 1983). Notwithstanding the strengths of the Elaboration Likelihood Model, there are some evident weaknesses. Critics suggest that it overly simplifies the complexity of human cognition into a binary approach to persuasion. However, they are considered mutually exclusive routes when, in fact, individuals process a message using both routes. Sometimes individuals process a message elaborately enough to have elements of deep and superficial elements combined in their decision-making. This should be considered a blending of routes that ELM does not account for (Trumbo, 1999). To address this limitation of ELM, this study intends to interview customers of the African

Regent Hotel, which offers an accurate understanding of how people form attitudes and make decisions in real-world settings.

## **2.6 Synthesis of the theories**

The Social Proof Theory and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) together offer deep insights into how consumer reviews and ratings shape brand perception and purchasing decisions. Although they originate from different psychological backgrounds, these theories complement each other when studying consumer behavior in digital environments, particularly where service reviews and ratings play a major role. Social Proof Theory, introduced by Robert Cialdini in 1984, revolves around the idea that people often look to others' behavior as a guide for their own, especially when they are uncertain. In the context of consumer behavior, this means that individuals are likely to be influenced by online reviews and ratings. If a product or service has a high number of positive reviews, potential customers are more inclined to perceive it positively and make a purchase decision based on this social validation. This theory explains why consumers follow the behavior or opinions of others when deciding whether to buy a product or engage with a brand.

On the other hand, the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), developed by Richard Petty and John Cacioppo in 1980, explains how people process persuasive information through two routes: the central route and the peripheral route. When consumers are highly motivated and able to think critically, they engage in central route processing, where they deeply analyze information such as the content of reviews. However, when consumers are less motivated or unable to process information in detail, they rely on peripheral cues, like the overall rating or the sheer number of positive reviews, to make a quick decision. In this case, social proof acts as a peripheral cue,

guiding consumers who may not want to invest time and effort into in-depth research. Both theories work well together in explaining the influence of consumer reviews and ratings.

Secondly, Social Proof Theory shows that consumers trust the opinions of others and are likely to follow the crowd, while ELM helps us understand the cognitive processes that determine whether consumers engage deeply with the reviews or rely on the overall rating as a shortcut. Together, these theories reveal that consumers might not always make rational, informed decisions but instead rely on cues provided by others to form perceptions about a brand. For instance, when potential customers browse an e-commerce platform, they might be influenced by a large number of positive reviews for a product, which serves as social proof that the product is trustworthy. If they are highly involved in the decision-making process, they may engage in central route processing by carefully reading and evaluating individual reviews. However, if they are purchasing something with less emotional significance, they might rely on peripheral processing, making a decision based on the consensus reflected in the ratings.

Thirdly, in terms of brand perception, consumer reviews and ratings play a critical role in shaping how people view a company. Positive reviews serve as a form of social proof, enhancing the brand's image in the minds of potential customers. Similarly, when it comes to purchasing decisions, consumers may feel more confident in their choice if they see that many others have had positive experiences with a product or service. Social proof reduces the uncertainty involved in making a purchase, while ELM explains how the amount of effort consumers are willing to invest in evaluating the reviews depends on their level of interest and involvement. Together, Social Proof Theory and ELM provide a comprehensive understanding of how consumer reviews and ratings shape decision-making.

Lastly, Social proof gives the social validation people seek, while ELM explains how consumers process this information differently depending on their involvement. By integrating these two perspectives, the study seeks to provide a better understanding on how consumer feedback influences brand perception and purchasing decisions in today's digital marketplace.

## **2.7 Chapter Summary**

The study of the role of customer service reviews and rating influence in shaping brand perception and purchasing decisions is grounded in two key theoretical frameworks: social proof theory and the elaboration likelihood model. Both theories further explain how external influences, such as other people's opinions and strategic communication, affect individual-level decision-making processes. The Social Proof theory and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) together create a framework for clear analysis and are therefore applicable to customer reviews of services offered, as good reviews tend to increase a brand's perceptions while bad reviews tend to turn away prospective clients. This understanding is further elaborated by Petty and Cacioppo in their Elaboration Likelihood Model, which describes how individuals process persuasive information either through the central route or through the peripheral route. Whereas the central route is done with a more in-depth and credible information evaluation, the peripheral route is through superficial cues such as the volume of reviews or overall ratings. ELM explains how customers' involvement with reviews changes based on the level of involvement and type of decision. Again, the chapter explores customer reviews and ratings, including brand perception, purchase decisions, trust, and credibility. The study combines the theoretical frameworks with these concepts to provide a deep analysis of how customer reviews and ratings shape brand perceptions and purchasing behavior. Lastly, the empirical review section discusses findings from related studies and the implications of the findings. Therefore, this study combines theoretical input with

empirical evidence to explore how customer service reviews and ratings shape brand perception and purchasing decisions in depth. By applying both the Social Proof Theory and the Elaboration Likelihood Model, this research obtains valuable insights into how consumer behavior is altered by reviews at which touchpoint a brand can best manage its virtual reputation.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Chapter Introduction**

Chapter three outlines the research methodology phase that is used in the study; it presents the suitable research approach to explore the role customer service reviews play in shaping brand perception and their resulting influence on consumer purchasing decisions and also discusses the research design, sampling strategy, data collection techniques, data collection process, ethical considerations, authenticity and trustworthiness, and data analysis techniques.

#### **3.2 Research Approach**

This study employs a qualitative research approach to explore how customer service reviews and ratings influence customers' brand perception and purchasing decisions within the hotel industry. Qualitative research is a methodological approach concerned with the development of an in-depth and nuanced understanding of participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and attitudes. This approach is appropriate and helpful to elicit richness from the participants' viewpoints and subtlety in their interactions with service providers (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research is conducted principally for the realization of phenomena as described by those experiencing the same. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011), it aims to generate detailed insights into the subjective experiences of people and the meanings attached to such experiences. In this study, the qualitative approach allows an in-depth study of how customer service reviews and ratings of hotels shape perceptions of the brand, thereby influencing consumer purchasing decisions. Qualitative methods, therefore, become imperative in digging out the intricate details with context specificity that would help in the comprehensive understanding of such dynamics.

### **3.3 Research Design**

This study employs a case study research design, which befits an in-depth and nuanced study into the role customer service reviews and ratings play in shaping brand perception and driving consumer purchase decisions for hotels. The case study approach is particularly fitting for this research, as it allows an in-depth analysis of specific cases in a comprehensive way. The case study research design involves an in-depth investigation into a particular case or a small number of cases within their natural setting (Yin, 2018). This approach is useful when the research deals with complex phenomena that require an in-depth contextual analysis. By nature, the qualitative research approach underlying this case study design focuses on deep understanding through detailed, non-numerical data. Creswell (2013) argues that qualitative research is concerned with exploring participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and meanings. This approach has, in particular, been eminently suitable for the study of social processes and interactions, such as those involved in customer service and brand perception. By utilizing this research design, the study aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of how customer service reviews and ratings influence brand perception and consumer decision-making processes in the hotel industry. The case study design thus serves as an influential tool in uncovering the intricate dynamics at play and generating actionable insights for both academic and practical applications.

### **3.4 Population**

In research, the term "population" refers to the total set of individuals, groups, or entities sharing characteristics pertinent to the investigation (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). In this context, population refers to all entities related to the African Regent Hotel, Kempinski Hotel, Best Western Plus, Oak Plaza Hotels, and La Villa Boutique Hotel including its services, management, staff, and

customers. These hotels vary in their target audience, services, and reputation. Together provide an important research population that cuts across the broad spectrum of hotel experiences in Accra. At the forefront of this population is the African Regent Hotel, which is among the finest luxury hotels in Accra, the capital of Ghana, known for its elegant blend of Africa's culture with modernity in style. The hotels cater to a diverse range of clientele, from corporate travelers to tourists, and are renowned for their commitment to customer service.

On the other end of the spectrum is Kempinski Hotel Gold Coast City, which is another example of a luxury and international sophistication hotel in Accra. This hotel belongs to the globally recognized Kempinski brand, offering opulence no other hotel can boast, which attracts high-profile guests, corporate executives, and international dignitaries. The hotel is known for its expansive grounds, luxurious suites, and cutting-edge facilities, Kempinski is the preferred choice of people who aspire to have an elite experience in Accra.

In contrast to the exclusivity of Kempinski, Best Western Plus Accra Beach Hotel offers a more affordable and equal experience for a broader range of clientele. The hotel is situated along the coastline, combining the reliability of its brand with the charm of a beachside resort. Best Western Plus caters to families, vacationers, and business travelers who seek balanced quality and affordability.

Oak Plaza Hotels add another layer of diversity to the study population, focusing on comfort and efficient business-class accommodations. The Oak Plaza Hotel stands out in its ability to deliver high-quality services at competitive rates. The hotel attracts business travelers and conference attendees, providing them with modern facilities and reliable services that meet professional's needs.

Finally, La Villa Boutique Hotel is small, luxurious, and offers a more intimate, personalized experience. Unlike the larger hotels, La Villa Boutique takes pride in a unique blend of privacy, charm, and exclusivity. It is situated in a quiet part of Accra, appealing to clientele who love an intimate, low-key atmosphere.

The selection of these hotels is not random but is based on a series of considerations since they provide a varied and deep research population that makes them ideal for this research. Each of these hotels offers distinct insights into the different segments of the hospitality industry, which range from luxury to efficient service for business guests, cultural immersion, or family-friendly relaxation. Over the years, these hotels have built an online reputation through sites like TripAdvisor, Google Reviews, and Booking.com making them an ideal subject for the study. In addition, these hotels also provide enough data to understand how customer perceptions are formed to drive purchasing decisions.

However, this study primarily focuses on customers of these selected hotels since they come into direct contact with their services at the hotel and provide feedback via online mediums, such as TripAdvisor and Google Reviews, in the form of reviews and ratings.

The "target population" refers to a subset of this broad population. It constitutes the group of people that the researcher desires to study or draw conclusions about (Kumar, 2011). The customers of these selected hotels are the best target population for the study because they represent a wide variety of clientele from luxury travelers, to business people and tourists. Also, have experience with online reviews and ratings and also have particularly sensitive to service quality. Because of this variation, getting responses from different types of customers provides the researcher with an in-depth understanding of how diverse types of people respond to customer reviews and ratings, and how these reviews and ratings shape brand perceptions and influence purchasing decisions.

Limiting the study to only customers who give feedback about their stay in the hotels ensures the results apply directly to the aim of the study.

### **3.5 Sample and Sampling Strategy**

A sample is a selected portion drawn from a population for research purposes. As it would not be practically feasible to study every member of the population on grounds of time, cost, and accessibility, the researcher would research the sample to generalize findings to the population. Thus, an appropriate sampling provides results that can be generalized to the population with an acceptable accuracy of estimation. (Creswell & Creswell, 2018)

On the other hand, the sampling strategy relates to a method in which a sample is selected from the population. There are different sampling strategies and they are usually categorized as either probability or non-probability. Probability sampling, such as random sampling, for instance, makes the members of the population stand an equal chance of being selected. This would increase the representativeness of the sample, hence increasing the validity and generalizability of the findings (Saunders & Thornhill, 2019).

Purposive sampling was used to select the participants for the study. According to Raj and Thapa (2015), 'the goal of purposive sampling is to focus on particular characteristics of a population that are of interest, which enable a researcher to answer their research questions. The sample being studied is not representative of the population.' The participants selected were active customers of the African Regent Hotel, Kempinski Hotel, Best Western Plus, Oak Plaza Hotels, and La Villa Boutique Hotel. A sample size of 10 participants was selected for this research, 2 participants from each of the hotels. The selection of active customers from the population of renowned hotels such as African Regent Hotel, Kempinski Hotel, Best Western Plus, Oak Plaza Hotels, and La Villa Boutique Hotel, is a strategic decision based on qualitative research methodology. This sampling

choice allows the researcher to gain in-depth, context-specific insights into customer experiences, behaviors, and perceptions within the luxury hotel industry.

By focusing on 10 participants, the researcher can achieve data saturation without being overwhelmed by too many interviews. This number is manageable for in-depth qualitative analysis and also falls within best practices in qualitative research, whereby fewer participants are often selected based on their capability to provide rich, detailed information (Guest et al., 2006). Choosing participants from different hotels increases the diversity of experiences, enabling the researcher to explore cross-comparisons between customer experiences from different establishments, hence giving a wider understanding of customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry, (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Efforts were made to ensure diversity in participants' demographics, including gender, age, and consumer experience.

### **3.6 Data Collection Technique**

A semi-structured interview was employed in this study, as it is a widely used qualitative method that balances structure with flexibility. As defined by Kallio et al. (2016), "a semi-structured interview is a qualitative method of data collection whereby the interviewer uses a set of predetermined questions but allows a deeper exploration into the research topics that might come up during the interview." This format allows the interviewer to probe responses, and provide a balance between maintaining focus on the research objectives and allowing spontaneity in the discussion.

The development of the interview guide followed a systematic process, aimed at ensuring the exploration of the themes while allowing room for unanticipated insights. Initially, broad themes were identified from the research objectives, such as customer service reviews, ratings, and their

influence on consumer behavior and brand perception. These themes formed the basis of the interview questions.

The second step involved designing open-ended questions that allowed participants to share opinions in detail. Open-ended questions are essential in semi-structured interviews, as they enable the interviewer to probe further into the interviewee's responses that may reveal unexpected patterns or insights.

The final interview guide consisted of several broad questions under each theme that allowed the interviewer to naturally drive the conversation toward every key area that needed to be covered. Probing and follow-up questions were also included to enable interviewers to clarify and develop any interesting responses. This approach ensured the richness of the data collected while keeping the data collection aligned with the focus of the study on consumer reviews and ratings.

### **3.7 Data Collection Process**

The data collection process involves several key steps. Initially, potential participants for the interviews were strategically identified. Following this, the 10 identified participants were contacted through e-mail and WhatsApp with the study synopsis to seek their participation. Once approval was obtained from the supervisor, participant consent forms together with the interview guide were sent to the participants for their confirmation of participation. Upon receiving a positive response, a face-to-face interview session was scheduled.

The 10 interviews conducted, serve as the basis for the analysis. An interview guide was developed in advance and pre-tested among selected graduate students to eliminate any ambiguities in the interview questions. On average, each of the interviews lasted for about 35 minutes and was recorded with the participant's permission and then transcribed for easier analysis. To ensure the validity of the study, the researcher intends to employ member-checking by sending the transcripts

to the interview participants after the transcription, allowing them to verify that their opinions were accurately captured before analysis.

### **3.7 Data Analysis Techniques**

Data analysis is also conducted leveraging thematic analysis. This involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within the qualitative data (Clarke & Braun, 2016). This technique enables researchers to systematically organize the data obtained and derive meaningful themes that ultimately reflect the participants' experiences and perspectives. The process of data analysis includes coding, theme development, and constant comparison to the raw data obtained initially to ensure that findings resonate with the participants' narratives and there is no deviation or bias influence.

### **3.8 Ethical Considerations**

Ethics needs to be observed in the entire process of the study. Correia (2023) highlights the significance of ethics in research that aids in ruling out any potential misconduct that may arise through scientific methods or may influence the findings presented to the world. Since the research is based on the principle of ethical practice, it focuses on gaining informed consent from all respondents. In alignment with ethical standards, before data collection, ethical approval was diligently sought from the University of Media, Arts, and Communication (UNIMAC). The practice of informed consent is a fundamental ethical principle of respect for persons, concern, and consideration where the respondent should have a full understanding of the purpose of the study, the role of participation, and any further use of gathered data (World Medical Association, 2013). Anonymity and confidentiality are part of the ethical setup for the study, in which the protection of identity and sensitive information is concerned. Anonymity is not only achieved through the use of pseudonyms but also through an intentional avoidance of the participants' names during the

data collection process. The demographic data are only collected for added protection of the identities of the participants. This, according to established ethical guidelines, is an undue practice where identifiable information is to be kept minimal to minimize risks, Yilmaz (2013) states. The study further ensures that participants have a right to withdraw at any stage in the process of research and that participation is voluntary. The above ethical consideration goes in line with the principle of autonomy, where respect is accorded to persons' decisions regarding their participation in or withdrawal from the research study without any form of coercion or undue influence (World Medical Association, 2013).

### **3.9 Authenticity and Trustworthiness**

Participant checking in this study was used as a method of enhancing authenticity and trustworthiness. Interview transcripts were returned to participants after data collection for review purposes and comments. Such a process allows participants to confirm whether they have been represented correctly, while at the same time offering them an avenue of elaborating or adding information that they deem important. By engaging participants in this manner, the study ensured that the data remained consistent with their intended meanings, reducing the likelihood of researcher bias or misinterpretation. Additionally, participant checking helped ensure that the final results reflected the true perspectives and experiences of the participants, further strengthening the credibility of the research outcomes (Lindheim, 2022).

### **3.10 Chapter Summary**

Chapter three provided a comprehensive understanding and information of the research methodology, which includes the research approach, design, sampling strategy, data collection

techniques, data collection process, ethical considerations, authenticity and trustworthiness, and data analysis techniques. This methodology section provides details that guide the study in investigating the role of customer service reviews and ratings in shaping brand perception and influencing the purchasing decisions of prospective customers in the hospitality industry in Ghana.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **RESULTS AND ANALYSIS**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

The chapter elaborates on the findings that have been derived from data collected for this study. It specifically focuses on analyzing how customer reviews influence hotel booking decisions. The data was collected from interviews and analyzed to uncover some of the key themes and insights related to customer perception and decision-making behavior in the hotel industry. The analysis proceeds with the key research questions: “how do customer service reviews and ratings influence the consumer perception of a brand?”, “how does brand perception influence consumers' purchasing decisions?” and “what factors influence how consumers interpret customer service reviews and ratings?”

Results are presented and analyzed in this chapter, with a special emphasis on the responses from the participants. The findings are categorized into themes that reflect the central themes identified during the data collection phase. By this analysis, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how customer reviews shape consumer behavior, especially in hotel booking. This section also explains the implications of such findings in light of previous research on consumer behavior and online review platforms. It provides a critical assessment of how customer feedback impacts hospitality industry decision-making processes.

#### **4.2 Participants Demographic**

The table below presents the gender and age of the participants. This is because the study recognized the demographic characteristics of participants as essential in establishing how gender and age might influence their responses to the focus of the study about customer reviews on hotel

booking decisions. This section analyzes the gender and age distribution of interviewees, as shown in Tables 1 and 2, and explores how the variables under investigation might be impacted.

**Table 4.1: Gender Demographic**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Number of participants</b>
Male	8
Female	2
Total	10

**Source: Field Data (2024)**

Table 1 presents the gender distribution of participants in the current study. Of the 10 participants, 8 (80%) were male and 2 (20%) were female. The dominance of males in this study may reflect certain gender-specific behaviors or preferences when it comes to decision-making with regard to hotel bookings. The male participants may attach greater importance to aspects related to, say, customer reviews, as earlier studies demonstrated the presence of gender-based differences both in online behaviors and purchasing decisions.

**Table 4.2: Age Demographic**

<b>Age</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
<b>25-34 years</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>35 to 44 years</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>45 to 54 years</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>55 and above</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>

By age group, as outlined in Table 2, the highest number of participants were between the ages of 35 to 44 years, standing at 6 out of 10 (60%). Another 4 participants, or 40%, came from the age bracket between 25 and 34 years old, while no interviewee belonged to the age brackets of 45-54 years or 55 and above.

This age distribution indicates that the study mostly captures the views of younger to middle-aged adults who may have more frequent engagement with online review platforms due to their higher levels of digital literacy and frequent use of online booking services. This age group may also exhibit different consumer behaviors compared to older demographics, as they are typically more reliant on digital tools for decision-making.

### 4.3 Brief Description of Themes

Thematic analysis and coding for this study were aided by NVivo, which is a qualitative software that helps the researcher in the process of coding and conducting thematic analysis. According to Bazeley and Jackson, (2019), software like NVivo facilitates the process of coding since it offers one a systematic way of organizing and analyzing qualitative data. The codes generated from the data collected were checked by the researcher against the individual coding sheets. From this process, themes depicted in Figure 1 below emerged, which formed the basis for the analysis.

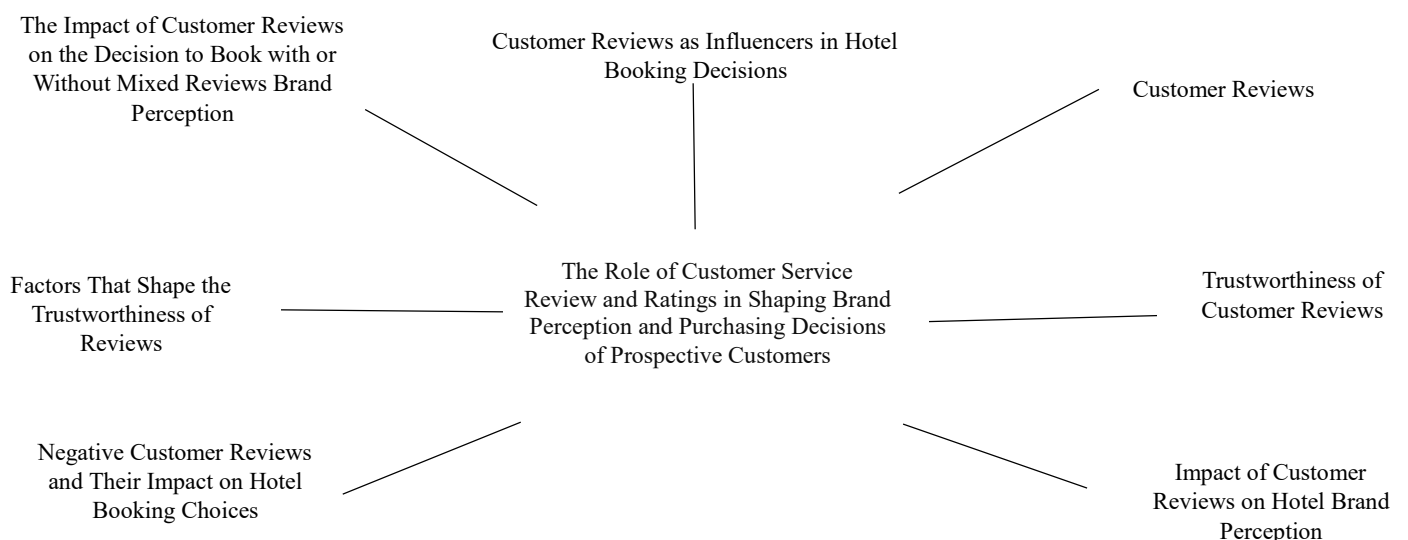


Figure 4.1: Model showing themes generated, the researcher's creation

### ***Theme 1. Customer Reviews as Influencers in Hotel Booking Decisions***

The first important insight from the data analysis is the great influence of customer reviews on hotel choice. Participants consistently indicated that reviews help them gather substantial information on the quality of service, facilities, and overall experiences customers have with any given hotel. Such information is considered paramount in narrowing down options and choosing the most appropriate hotel. For instance, Participant 1 highlighted, *"Their reviews give me the ability to pick the right hotel,"* where the utility of reviews was stressed in the decision-making process. Participant 2 described reviews as *"summing up the overall impression of a hotel, making it easier to evaluate its suitability"*. Participant 3 explained the practical implications of reviews *"I usually look out for those things mentioned in the review online when I get into the hotel, which gives me a fair deal and informs my decision to return or not."* This indicates how great reviews set expectations and thus repeat bookings. Participant 4 gave a broader perspective: *"When choosing a hotel in Ghana, customer reviews shape my choice significantly, but I also consider price, location, and overall trends in the feedback. I value balanced, recent reviews and look for recurring patterns before making a decision."* This response brings forth the nuance with which customers approach this, combining reviews with other decision factors such as price and location. For others, the effect of reviews is quite direct. Participant 5 succinctly said, *"Greatly,"* while the response by Participant 6 said, *"It gives me assurance of good services at the hotel."* To the same question, Participant 7 also assured of the strong influence of reviews with his simple, *"Very much."* Participant 8 and 9 pinpointed, respectively, that *"It makes me know the most comfortable hotel to reside"* and *"Helps me have an idea of the best hotel in a particular area."* Finally,

participant 10 mentioned that with reviews, *“it gives firsthand information that helps me cut off uncertainties in choosing the right type of accommodation”*. These responses underscore how reviews act as guiding tools for prospective customers, helping them evaluate whether a hotel meets their expectations.

## ***Theme 2. Customer Reviews***

Participants stressed that reviews from clients are fundamental to their choice and, among those, focused on certain key aspects related to cleanliness, customer service, and amenities. These all provide indicators of the quality and trustworthiness of the hotel, which has considerable implications for perceptions and expectations. Participant 1 responded that the experiences shared by previous clients are important in that such feedback helps them strive for *“the best hospitality service yet.”* This is a trust that reviews will lead them to make choices. Participant 2 pointed out the *“aesthetics of the place, customer service, and rates,”* adding that reviews help them *“know what to expect or what I am going in for.”* This suggests that reviews offer clarity about the tangible and intangible aspects of the hotel experience. For Participant 3, cleanliness was a significant factor. He said, *“It shows how convenient, clean, and customer-friendly the place is,”* which reflects how much hygiene weighs in when it comes to preference. Participant 4 elaborated on the importance of comments within reviews, explaining that specific feedback helps *“identify consistent strengths or weaknesses.”* He noted that comments about *“cleanliness, customer service, and amenities are particularly influential in the decision-making process.”* According to this participant, reviews act as a mirror of the hotel’s brand, with positive reviews *“building trust”* and negative ones raising concerns, thus shaping brand perception and customer expectations. Similarly, Participant 5 expressed that reviews about customer service guide whether *“to go for*

*the service or decline,*" emphasizing the decisive role of customer feedback. Participant 6 emphasized comments, saying that reviews allow them to *"know what to expect in the usage of the hotel."* This supports the comment of Participant 7 on how reviews about *"customer service determine whether you will enjoy your stay at the hotel or not."* To Participant 8, safety and the environment were the most important. He mentioned how reviews had helped him to be sure that it would be a *"safe and healthy"* stay, indicating how reviews address both practical and emotional concerns. Participant 9 referred to *"the importance of ratings"*, whereas Participant 10 underlined the fact that reviews *"give you the idea of what you are getting yourself into,"* supporting their usefulness in setting expectations. This shows that beyond numerical ratings, the detailed narrative in customer reviews holds significant weight in influencing potential guests.

### ***Theme 3. Trustworthiness of Customer Reviews***

The theme of trust in customer reviews was also considered to be very critical by participants because it affected their decision-making process. Trustworthiness is always related to consistency, a lot of detail, timely reviews, and even a weighted tone. Most participants believe that the balance, with many different points of view expressed in reviews, is more convincing than unilaterally extremely positive or extremely negative ones. Participant 1 said, *"Customer reviews are very trustworthy," showing a high level of reliance on the review for guidance"*. In turn, Participant 2 contributed, *"I depend on customer reviews a lot of times as it is trustworthy,"* signaling regard for such feedback. Some participants acknowledged limitations in trustworthiness but still considered reviews highly influential. Participant 3 remarked, *"Even though it's not 100% trustworthy, it's 80% trustworthy, and I'm fine with that,"* a sentiment echoed by Participant 4, who also stated, *"Even though it's not 100% trustworthy, it's 80% trustworthy, and I'm fine with that."* Others

mentioned conditions under which reviews were deemed trustworthy. Participant 5 said, *"Generally, I find reviews trustworthy, especially when there's a consensus across multiple reviews,"* emphasizing corroboration. Participant 9 added, *"I find reviews trustworthy when the same compliments are posted by various customers or clientele, as not everyone would lie about their experience with the hotel."* Where other participants were more neutral with their stances, as in the case of Participant 6, who labeled them *"a 50/50,"* others were rather outspoken. Participant 7 referred to reviews as *"very trustworthy,"* while Participant 8 described them as *"highly very necessary."* Participant 10 also underscored their importance, *"they are very important."* These responses outline the complex sets of views on the issue of customer reviews' reliability, revealing a range of trust that has been modulated by individual preferences and emergent content patterns in reviews.

#### ***Theme 4. Impact of Customer Reviews on Hotel Brand Perception***

Customer reviews proved to be one of the influential elements in participants' development of perceptions about a hotel's brand. Positive reviews were often related to traits such as reliability, trustworthiness, and high-quality service, while negative ones were related to ruining a hotel's reputation. Participants also emphasized that reviews are an important tool for making decisions, helping them get insight into the quality and consistency of service. Participant 1 showed how reviews influence him, stating that reviews *"guide me by wanting me to go for the best hospitality service yet."* In like manner, Participant 2 also asserted the role that reviews play in setting expectations: *"To know what to expect or what I am going in for."* Participant 3, also stated that *"It provides information on how convenient, clean and customer friendly the place is"*. The practical benefits of reviews were also reiterated by Participant 4, who identified that reviews will

show *"how convenient, clean, and customer-friendly the place is,"* reflecting the detailed insights that reviews have. Participant 5 explained further that *"Customer service reviews and ratings play an important role in building my perception of a hotel brand since it reflects the quality of guest experiences. Positive reviews create trust for good service, comfort, and value, while negative ones raise suspicion over possible problems"*. Other participants pointed out how reviews shape decisions about patronage. Participant 6 remarked, *"To go for the service or decline,"* while Participant 7 stated, *"That determines whether you will enjoy your stay at the hotel or not."* Participants 8 also expressed that *"Yes, it makes me know how I will be safe and healthy at the Hotel"* For many, reviews also offer a glimpse into their potential experience, as Participant 9 *"answered "yes" to Customer service reviews and ratings shape your perception of the hotel brand"* Participant 10 explained: *"Yes it does, it gives you the idea of what you are getting yourself into."* In sum, participants unanimously agreed on the significant role of customer reviews in shaping their perception of a hotel brand. Reviews provide essential insights into service quality, helping customers make informed decisions and shaping the overall brand image of hotels.

#### ***Theme 5. The Impact of Customer Reviews on the Decision to Book With or Without Mixed Reviews***

Participants' responses indicate mixed feelings about how customer reviews influence their decisions to book or not, especially when mixed reviews are involved. Some participants were willing to consider mixed reviews under certain conditions, while others stressed the need to avoid low-rated options altogether. Participant 1 would prefer mixed reviews over universally low reviews as he said, *"I will prefer a mixed review to all low reviews."* To this, the simple affirmation of Participant 7 was, *"Mixed reviews."* On the other hand, Participant 2 treated reviews and ratings

as word-of-mouth recommendations and dismissed the idea of mixed reviews outright: *"No, reviews and ratings are like recommendations to me."* Participant 3 and Participant 9 also rejected the idea of mixed reviews with a straightforward *"No"*. Participant 4 was a bit more specific in her response, stating she would consider mixed reviews if the price or location suited her preferences: *"I'm open to mixed reviews if the price or location is ideal, but I avoid low-rated hotels regardless of these factors."* Participant 5 was somewhat indifferent: *"It depends,"* whereas Participant 6 had a straightforward answer, rejecting mixed reviews outright with the comment, *"Not at all."* Participants 8 and 10 showed openness toward mixed reviews with a straightforward affirmative *"Yes."* On the whole, these responses indicate a range from open-mindedness to cautious consideration of an outright rejection, according to personal preference and priorities such as price, location, and the level of confidence in reviews.

## **Theme 6. Factors That Shape the Trustworthiness of Reviews**

Participants identified factors that would lead them to either believe or doubt a review. Responses focused on the consistency and specificity, recency of the review, and credibility of the reviewer. Several participants highlighted the impact of consistency in reviews, such as Participant 1, who maintained, *that "The consistency of similar reviews from different people in different places"* was important. A uniformity across reviews suggests for some that this is something genuine. Participant 2 commented, *"Always check the name and current location of the poster"* to give assurance that the review is valid. Participant 3 explained, *"How multiple reviews keep repeating the same thing"* adds to its credibility. Negative reviews mentioning specific issues like cleanliness or staff attitude helped Participant 4 to build trust: *"Yes, reviews mentioning poor cleanliness or unfriendly staff have deterred me. These issues impact comfort and experience."* Specificity,

balance, and recency were also identified as important traits of trustworthy reviews. Participant 5 said, *"A review feels trustworthy if it's specific, balanced, and recent. Reviews that sound overly emotional or vague seem less credible."* Participant 6 echoed timeliness, saying, *"The older the review,"* the less relevant it is likely to be. Likewise, Participant 7 supports the collective opinion when he says, *"When majority seem to have shared the same opinion of the facility."* The identity and location of the reviewer were also important to some. Participant 8 considered the dependability of the reviewers if they were familiar people, stating, *"If the reviewers are known people."* Social proof and rating also played a vital role in determining authenticity. For Participant 9, it had to do with the issue of *"research and social proof"* when it came to looking into reviews, while for Participant 10, *"When more stars are rated, you can trust that the reviews are authentic."*

#### ***Theme 7. Negative Customer Reviews and Their Impact on Hotel Booking Choices***

Poor customer reviews may have a major influence on potential customers' decisions when booking a hotel. Several participants mentioned that factors like poor housekeeping, delay in services, or lack of amenities influenced them to rethink choosing a hotel. Participant 1 said, *"The reason was poor housekeeping and delay in service rendering,"* meaning that factors of cleanliness and the effectiveness of the delivery of service can leave a sour memory for a long time. Similarly, Participant 2 commented, *"It created a negative impression to me,"* pointing out how negative reviews help form a customer's impression of a hotel even before they have stayed at it. Other participants said the frequency of the complaints was an important factor that shaped their opinions. According to Participant 3, *"It wasn't just one person complaining about the place but multiple people,"* which presupposes that with many reviews voicing the same problems, the complaints become credible enough to affect booking choices. In the case of other participants,

specific concerns with something like cleanliness or the attitude of the hotel staff were leading. Participant 4 also revealed that *"negative reviews about dirtiness or the unavailability of welcoming staff has discouraged me, as it concerns comfort and experience."* Therefore, from this statement, it can be said that perceived comfort and the overall experience are important considerations in selecting a hotel. On the other hand, Participant 5 simply said, *"Nobody likes a bad hotel,"* which shows the lean toward positive experiences and satisfaction in hotel stays. Besides the physical aspects of the hotel, some of the participants mentioned that a negative review could indicate something about the hotel's insufficient amenities or unsatisfactory service. Participant 6 listed *"lack of a swimming pool and not so delicious food,"* which suggests that the absence of wanted amenities or poor quality food also may discourage bookings. Moreover, as Participant 7 said, *"Customers were not given a good feedback system"* which may indicate the relevant role of a responsive review system in maintaining good relations with customers. Some participants have stressed health and safety concerns. For instance, Participant 8 said, *"Yes, for safety and health reasons,"* which evidences that reviews that mention safety issues or unhygienic conditions will make customers avoid particular establishments. Participant 9 questioned the hotel's ability to provide basic services: *"It meant that the hotel may not have basic services that will make my stay comfortable."* On the other hand, not all participants have been influenced by negative reviews. For example, Participant 10 said, *"No,"* which means their decisions to book a hotel may not be too strongly influenced by negative feedback. In summary, the responses from participants show that negative reviews significantly impact hotel booking choices, particularly when they concern cleanliness, service quality, amenities, or safety. While some participants remain unaffected, the majority consider these reviews when making decisions, underscoring the importance of maintaining positive online reputations.

#### **4.4 Discussions of Findings**

The findings give valuable insight into how customer reviews have influenced hotel booking decisions, especially about gender and age demographics. In the analysis of the gender and age distribution of participants, several distinctive patterns emerged that supported previous literature on online consumer behavior, specifically in the context of the hospitality industry.

The fact that most of the participants were males, at 80%, and only a portion were females, at 20%, is an interesting presentation of the data. The imbalance in gender could be representative of gendered differences in online behavior and decision-making processes. Previous studies have identified the critical role that gender plays in shaping online consumer behavior, and some have highlighted that men are more likely than women to engage with online reviews in an active manner or to use them as an important decision-making tool (Sparks & Browning, 2011). However, this presents a limitation in this study because there is no gender balance, hence a need for further research with proper gender representations to fully understand its implications on consumer behavior in the hospitality sector. The age bracket of the participants was 35-44 years with 60%, followed by 25-34 years with 40%. This finding is in line with the growing trend of younger to middle-aged adults being more digitally literate and active on online platforms, such as hotel booking sites and review forums. Younger adults tend to rely more on online reviews, while older demographics still value traditional sources of information such as word-of-mouth or travel agents, according to Vermeulen and Seegers (2009).

Furthermore, customer reviews have emerged to become a crucial tool in informing consumer decisions in the hospitality industry. The findings indicate how customer reviews guide prospective customers to understand the quality of the services, facilities, and experiences offered by hotels. Through reviews, valuable knowledge is imparted that facilitates the creation of realistic

expectations while minimizing uncertainties. This corresponds to the work of Vermeulen and Seegers, 2009, in terms of how user-generated content raises consumer consideration for especially lower-order hotels. One participant even mentioned how positive reviews help to create repeat bookings for customer loyalty. The review will also help customers screen choices on price, location, and emerging trends; all of these further support reviews as major informational tools in the process of decision-making.

Participants underlined the fact that some factors like cleanliness, customer service, and amenities are seen to be very strong indicators of quality and trustworthiness. Of these, cleanliness has emerged as a particularly influential determinant of customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry. Indeed, cleanliness is repeatedly correlated with guest approval in literature. The following example by one participant shows the need to find consistency in patterns within reviews, depicting the way customers carefully review feedback to discover subtle strengths or weaknesses in service delivery.

Again, the finding pertains to another emerging theme: trust in reviews. Participants showed differential reliance based on several features, which included consistency, specificity of review content, and recency of the review, among others. For instance, the participant suggested that the credence of review increases once corroborating information has come from different reviewers; therefore, vague information or a highly emotive review prompts skepticism. The observation hereby supports Sparks and Browning (2011), emphasizing the role of credibility and consistency among reviewers.

The study also highlighted the fact that customer reviews have a strong impact on brand perception. For customers, reviews are the lens through which they perceive the reliability, service quality, and overall trustworthiness of a hotel. Positive reviews enhance the reputation of a hotel, building

up a good brand image, while negative reviews destroy this by highlighting inconsistencies in service and customer dissatisfaction. As one participant pointed out, reviews show the value and quality of a hotel, which aligns with the assertion of Vermeulen and Seegers (2009) that exposure to positive reviews raises consumer interest. Surprisingly, mixed reviews received different responses from the participants. Although some based their choice on other factors such as price and location in case of mixed reviews of hotels, others would never choose hotels with negative comments. This diversity brings into focus how individual priorities and risk tolerance influence decision-making processes.

Social proof emerged as a critical factor in the findings. Participants consistently referred to how consensus played a role in the validation of reviews. One participant explained, "When the majority seem to share the same opinion of the facility," they are more likely to trust the reviews. This is in line with Social Proof Theory, proposed by Cialdini (1984), where people tend to act like others whom they perceive as similar to themselves. This study is supported by Senecal and Nantel (2004), who established that volume has a significant effect on consumer trust and booking intentions.

Accordingly, the finding reveals that negative comments, especially those with substandard housekeeping, rudeness of the host personnel, or lack of hospitality resources, had a more decisive deterring effect. Several participants mentioned that a constant complaint in reviews sounds a bit more credible and serves as a reflection of one's pattern recognition at times in making decisions. Additionally, health and safety raised by some participants illustrated an emotional and practical weightiness given to negative reviews. These findings also align with Sparks and Browning's (2011) conclusion that negative reviews are powerful in eroding consumer trust.

The findings also align with the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), which describes how consumers process persuasive information. According to the ELM framework, individuals who are highly motivated and capable of engaging with information process reviews through a central route, lead to enduring attitude changes. For example, one participant explained that when deciding to book, he has to research and analyze the reviews in detail, which is typical of central processing. However, for less important decisions, participants would depend on peripheral cues, such as the overall rating or number of reviews, which require less cognitive effort. This supports Petty and Cacioppo's (2012) contention that central processing involves deeper evaluation while peripheral processing relies on superficial cues.

#### **4.5 Chapter Summary**

This chapter presents the results of the study, focusing on the respondents' demographic characteristics and their impact on the analysis of customer reviews in hotel booking decisions. The demographic information involves the gender and age distribution of the participants, which is crucial in understanding how such factors may influence individuals' responses to customer reviews in the hotel booking process. The study has a clear majority of male participants, 80%, against only 20% female. The gender imbalance indicates that there may be gender-based differences in decision-making behaviors related to online customer reviews. The findings may show the preference of males, but the low number of females may restrict generalizing the findings across genders.

**Age Demographics:** The age distribution showed that most participants were younger to middle-aged adults, 60% between the ages of 35-44 years, and 40% within the age bracket of 25-34 years. Older age brackets (45 years and above) were absent and could be a limitation because the traits

may have varied decision-making processes, especially in their use of digital tools for online reviews and booking. Younger groups, being more digitally literate, are likely to rely more on online reviews than their older groups who may prefer traditional forms of information gathering. The chapter proceeds with a discussion of thematic analysis of the results based on interviews with participants; this identifies seven major themes in terms of how customer reviews play a role in the booking decisions of hotels.

The study finally, presented a discussion of the findings based on the study literature review and theories.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

This section of the study, emphasizes the overall contribution the study makes to knowledge and relevance to the field. It summarizes key findings, interprets what such findings mean, and provides recommendations for further studies and applications.

The present study has helped to explain the role of customer service reviews and ratings in shaping brand perception and purchasing decisions of future customers in the hospitality industry in Ghana. Data was derived from ten interviews conducted with careful selections, yielding very rich information on the way customer feedback influences branding strategies and consumer choices in the hospitality sector. These findings are discussed in great detail in Chapter Four. Chapter Five sums up these discussions by highlighting the main findings of the study, drawing thoughtful conclusions from the analysis, and providing practical and research-oriented recommendations. This chapter brings out the contributions of this study to the field and gives further opportunities for study that should be pursued to gain a deeper understanding of the subject.

#### **5.2 Summary of the Findings**

The study was designed to investigate the potential impact of customer service reviews and ratings on consumer behavior in the hotel industry within Ghana, with three key objectives: to explore how customer service reviews and ratings shape consumer's perception of hotel brands in Ghana, to assess how brand perception built through customer service reviews influence consumer purchasing decisions, and to understand the factors that influence consumers' interpretations of customer service reviews and ratings.

With the use of NVivo-aided thematic analysis, 7 themes have been elicited from the interviewees' responses to gain full insight into how customer feedback affects the hotel industry. This section provides a succinct summary of the findings for each research objective, incorporating the views of participants to emphasize the importance of customer service reviews and ratings in influencing consumer behavior.

Firstly, Objective 1: To explore how customer service reviews and ratings shape consumer's perception of hotel brands in Ghana.

The results show that indeed, customer reviews and ratings on services go a long way in shaping consumer perceptions of the hotel brands. The findings showed that reviews aid in evaluating service quality, cleanliness, and the general atmosphere around the hotel. As stated by Participant 1, "*Reading reviews give me the ability to pick the right hotel*". Similarly, participant 3 illustrated that "*I usually look out for those things mentioned in the review online when I get into the hotel, which gives me a fair deal and informs my decision to return or not.*" On the other hand, positive reviews build brand image by giving customers confidence in the quality of service and safety standards. For example, Participant 8 revealed, "Reviews help me to be sure of my safety and health standards possible at a hotel." Conversely, negative reviews deface brand image, as in the case of Participant 6, who canceled a booking because reviews pointed out poor customer service. These therefore reveal that customer reviews act to benchmark hotels on their reputation and competitiveness.

Secondly Objective 2: To assess how brand perception built through customer service reviews influences consumer purchasing decisions. Responses showed that customer service reviews have the most significant effect on consumers' decisions to book a hotel. Many respondents claimed to consider it as the final word in their buying decision. Admittedly, mixed reviews might discourage

but can sometimes result in hotel reservations, as long as other contextual factors, such as price and location, are on favorable terms. Participant 7 said, "Mixed reviews are acceptable, especially if the positive remarks are more than the negative feedback."

On the other hand, negative reviews tend to deter consumers from making a booking. For instance, Participant 1 mentioned not booking hotels with negative reviews regarding cleanliness and customer service, while Participant 8 referred to health and safety concerns disclosed in some reviews, such as the presence of mosquitoes. In these examples, negative feedback played a crucial role in deterring bookings and highlighted the need for maintenance of high standards to secure customers.

Thirdly, Objective 3: Understanding the Factors of Influence that Consumers Draw upon When Interpreting Customer Service Reviews and Ratings. Consumers' interpretations of customer service reviews are influenced by several factors, including trustworthiness, detail, consistency, and authenticity. Many interviewees expressed a high degree of trust in reviews when they were consistent across sources or reflected recurring themes. Participant 7 observed, "When many reviews mention similar issues, it reinforces their credibility." However, some respondents, like Participant 9, noted the need to cross-check reviews, particularly when they seemed overly positive or negative. The detailed nature and balance in reviews also seem to influence the nature of interpretations. Participant 4 summarized that "balanced reviews justify reasons for both positive and negative aspects of a hotel experience," and hence are more reliable. The authenticity of reviewers also emerged as important, as highlighted by Participant 7, who emphasized feedback from verified sources. Recency also impacts how reviews are interpreted, as newer reviews are perceived to reflect current standards of service. These results also show that consumers are

capable of sorting through information by reviewing the credibility and relevance of reviews to make better decisions.

### **5.3 Conclusion**

The results of this study established customer reviews and ratings as the most critical component of customer behavioral conception in the hotel industry in Ghana. Reviews are a prized source for prospective guests to get ideas about the level of service, cleanliness, ambiance, and overall customer experience offered by hotels. Positive reviews give your brand a boost and build trust, which leads to more bookings, whereas negative reviews will keep customers a reminder that keeping service standards high is important. The study further enumerates several factors that influence consumers' interpretations of reviews, such as the consistency, detail, authenticity, and recency of feedback. The feedback also needs to be trusted, according to most respondents, through feedback from verified persons and a consistent theme across various platforms. Mixed reviews, even though acceptable under certain contextual factors in some instances, are very careful to be weighed by the consumer through positive and negative aspects.

Overall, the results have meaningful implications for hotel managers, which prove that hotels should be actively managing their online reputation by attending to customer concerns, responding to customer feedback, and maintaining a high level of service quality. By effectively leveraging customer reviews, hotels can build stronger brand perception, build consumer trust, and also gain a competitive advantage in the marketplace.

### **5.4 Recommendations**

Based on the findings, several recommendations are outlined to help the hotel industry enhance its reputation and increase customer satisfaction by effectively managing customer service reviews and ratings.

First of all, the hotels should be proactive regarding customer reviews on various platforms. Responding to positive and negative comments promptly will prove that the hotel values customer feedback and is interested in providing better service. Negative comments must be treated tactfully, offering solutions or apologies where needed.

Secondly, the hotels can encourage guests to provide in-depth reviews of their experience both positive and negative aspects of their stay, making the travel decision of the future customer more informed and credible reviews.

Thirdly, since high trust exists in reviews among consumers that are verified, with consistent feedback, hotels should ensure reviews come from a legitimate and verified source. They should not engage in practices considered to be fake reviews, as these will lead to broken consumer trust.

Fourthly, positive reviews are a marketing tool used to highlight the hotel's strengths. Hotels should boast them on their website and social media pages to attract new customers and reinforce a positive brand image.

Lastly, most of the common complaints related to cleanliness, reception, and safety need to be emphasized and resolved. By upgrading in advance those areas that most frequently pop up in negative reviews, hotels can increase overall guest satisfaction and lower the number of dissatisfied guests.

#### **5.4 Limitations**

While the findings presented valuable insight, there are some limitations to the findings:

The first limitation is the sample size, which is relatively limited in number and region-specific. Therefore, the findings may not be generalized to other countries or broader populations in the hospitality industry. A larger sample that is more diverse would provide more comprehensive results.

Secondly, there was a delay in interviewing the selected interview due to their availability and their busy schedules.

Thirdly, some participants were unwilling to partake due a to lack of interest which led to the replacement of the interviewee.

Lastly, the research focused mostly on the perceptions of the consumers rather than the perspective of the hotel operators in terms of their review management and their perceived impact of customer feedback on their business.

### **5.5 Suggestions for Future Research**

Based on the limitations and the findings from this study, several avenues for future research can be explored:

Firstly, future studies should expand the sample size by ensuring a greater geographical representation, hotel categories (such as luxury or budget categories), and demographic backgrounds to enhance the generalizability of the results.

Secondly, future research should incorporate a mixed-methods approach that combines qualitative and quantitative research to provide a more robust analysis of how reviews influence consumer behavior.

Lastly, future research should focus on interviewing hotel operators and managers about perceptions regarding how customer reviews influence brand reputation and choices of bookings.

This might offer suggestions on how to manage the reputation of a hotel from the perspective of the hotel itself.

### **5.6 Chapter Summary**

Chapter 5 deals with the main results, conclusions, and practical recommendations based on the research into the influence of customer reviews and ratings on shaping brand perception and

purchasing decisions within the hospitality industry in Ghana. The chapter also synthesizes the information in earlier chapters, giving a comprehensive overview of how the present study contributes to the field; it discusses the limitations of the present study and gives suggestions for future exploration.

The objective of the study was to explore three primary elements: how customer service reviews and ratings influence or shape the consumer's perceptions about hotel brands in Ghana; assess what effects these perceptions have on buying behavior; and identify factors influencing how consumers interpret such reviews and ratings. Seven key themes emerged from the interview responses through NVivo-aided thematic analysis, giving valuable insights into the role of customer feedback in the hotel industry.

First, the study established that customer service reviews and ratings play a major role in shaping the consumer's perception of hotel brands. The responses indicated that reviews are important in setting expectations regarding the quality of service, cleanliness, and general guest experience. Good reviews made potential guests confident, increasing the value addition seen and perceived trustworthiness of the hotel. For example, many interviewees mentioned that, by reading positive feedback, they were assured of the safety and hygiene standards of the hotel, such as Interviewee 7, who stated, "Positive reviews reassure me of the safety and health standards possible at a hotel." On the other hand, negative reviews did just the opposite: they harmed the brand image of the hotel and made potential customers wary of making a booking. For instance, interviewee 6 reported canceling a booking based on reading negative reviews about customer service. This shows how negative feedback may lead to losses for a hotel.

Customer reviews influence brand perception, and the research indicated that brand perception is one of the crucial elements in driving the purchasing decisions of consumers. A larger proportion

of the respondents confessed that one of the most influential factors they considered while deciding on which hotel to stay in was customer reviews. Positive reviews were a significant driver to booking a hotel, while negative feedback, especially about cleanliness or safety, was the breaker. However, on the other side, the study also found that mixed reviews, although they may be seemingly conflicting, could also yield a booking when positive remarks outweigh the negative ones or other contextual factors such as price and location are favorable. On the same note, Interviewee 5 expressed, "Mixed reviews are acceptable especially if positive remarks surpass that of negative feedback," meaning that consumers could be well encouraged to book a service as long as the remarks from reviews are positive on the whole.

The third research objective investigated what affects how customers perceive customer service reviews and ratings. Among the factors identified, some stood out as particularly influential. Trustworthiness, detail, consistency, and authenticity emerged as the key factors that drove consumer purchasing decisions. The respondents demonstrated a very high level of trust in reviews when these were either consistent across sites or similar themes emerged from repeated incidents. In the words of Interviewee 6, "When many reviews raise similar issues, it reinforces their credibility." Additionally, detailed and balanced reviews were considered more credible. The interviewees also focused on how reviews needed to show not only positive aspects but also those of improvement, as that added to the credibility of the review. Recency also played a role in the way reviews are perceived, with consumers tending to lean more towards newer reviews since these reviews showed the service standard now. Consumers were also wary of extremely positive or extremely negative reviews and cross-checked often just to validate the feedback.

Drawing from this, the research concluded that customer reviews and ratings formed the basis of consumer behavior in Ghana's hotel industry. Good reviews were seen to boost a hotel's brand

perception by building trust and confidence, consequently raising its bookings. On the other hand, bad reviews diminish the reputation of a hotel and keep at bay other interested customers. The research also emphasized authenticity and consistency in reviews, adding the concept of recency to perceived relevance. These insights are important for hotel managers to understand the need for active online reputation management and responses to customer feedback to build better relationships with consumers. This will help hotels by improving the satisfaction of their guests, consequently improving their brand image as well as giving them a competitive advantage in the market. Some of the practical recommendations that were advanced to the managers of hotels included that indeed, hotels should adopt proactive customer review management behaviors across diverse platforms. Timely responses to both positive and negative reviews show that the hotel appreciates customer feedback and is interested in further betterment. Negative comments should be responded to tactfully by apologizing or providing solutions when needed. Secondly, hotels should be able to encourage guests to provide detailed and balanced reviews that cover both the positive and negative aspects of their stay. This not only adds credibility to the reviews but also aids future customers in making better decisions. Thirdly, hotels have to ensure that their reviews are from legitimate and verified sources since this develops trust with prospective customers. Whatever the case, fake reviews should not be displayed, as this may break consumer trust in them and harm the hotel's reputation. Additionally, positive reviews should be highlighted and promoted on the hotel's website and social media platforms to attract new customers and reinforce the hotel's positive brand image. Finally, hotel managers should address recurring complaints related to cleanliness, reception, and safety by upgrading these areas in advance, ensuring that they meet or exceed guest expectations, and reducing the likelihood of negative reviews.

However, the study also had several limitations. The sample was small and geographically confined to Ghana, so the findings might not be generalizable to other regions/countries within the hospitality industry. Therefore, it would have been helpful if the sample was more diverse in terms of categories of hotels and the demographic backgrounds of respondents to enhance the generalizability of results. Moreover, the interviews could not be carried out immediately because of the participants' availability and unwillingness of some interviewees that had to be replaced. Another limitation is that the scope of the current study has focused on the consumer's perception of reviews, without studying in great detail the perspective of the hotel operator about review management and customer feedback perceived to influence the course of their business.

Various directions for future studies were suggested given these limitations. Future studies may expand the sample size toward a wider geographic representation and may consider variants such as luxury or budget hotels to increase the generalizability of results. A mixed-method approach, which would blend both qualitative and quantitative research, could give a more complete exploration of how customer reviews impact consumer behavior. Last but not least, further research should also be directed at the interviewing of hotel operators and managers to ascertain their perceptions about how customer reviews influence brand reputation and bookings. This will equally provide useful information on how hotels can effectively manage their online reputations and improve their services from a business perspective.

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## **APPENDIX A: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE**

### **Research Topic:**

The Role of Customer Service Review and Ratings in Shaping Brand Perception and Purchasing Decisions of Prospective Customers in the Hospitality Industry in Ghana

### **Semi-Structured Interview Guide**

Welcome and thank you for participating in this study. This session is to garner your experiences with the role of customer service reviews and ratings in shaping brand perception and purchasing decisions of prospective customers in the hospitality industry in Ghana. Your responses will be kept confidential, and your participation is voluntary.

#### **A. Background**

1. Participant Information (e.g., gender, age, social media usage)

2. Have you ever booked a hotel online?

Yes/ No

3. Are you familiar with customer service reviews and ratings?

Yes/No

4. Have you used customer reviews or ratings to decide on a hotel booking?

Yes/No

#### **B. Customer Service Reviews and Brand Perception**

5. How often do you look at customer service reviews before making a booking at a hotel?

6. Which aspects of the review are most salient to you, including ratings and comments?

6b. Customer service reviews and ratings shape your perception of the hotel brand. How?

7. Did any review change your impression of a hotel, either positively or negatively? Provide a description.

8. State the features or characteristics you associate with those hotels that receive high customer service ratings in Ghana.

### **C. Brand Perception and Purchasing Decisions**

9. How do customer reviews influence your choice of hotel to stay in when you visit Ghana?

10. Will you book a hotel with mixed reviews or with an overall low rating if the price or location is favorable?

11. Have customer service reviews ever discouraged you from booking a hotel? If yes, for what reason?

12. In your opinion, how trustworthy are the customer service reviews concerning booking a hotel?

13. What causes a review to come across for you as trustworthy or not trustworthy?

### **D. Factors Impacting Interpretation of Reviews**

14. What do you consider when reading customer service reviews? Are there any factors you take into account? For instance, the number of reviews, how long ago the reviews are posted, the tone of reviews, etc.

15. To what extent do your personal preferences, expectations, or past experiences shape or even bias your interpretation of customer service reviews and ratings?

16. Have you ever experienced something that turned out different from what reviews said? How did that impact how much you trust reviews going forward?

### **Conclusion**

Any final thoughts or additional comments?

Thank you for your time and participation

**APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM**

My name is Amos Apau Akrofi, a postgraduate student in Public Relations and Marketing at the University of Media, Arts and Communications (UniMAC). I am conducting a research study to explore the role of customer service reviews and ratings in shaping brand perception and influencing purchasing decisions within the hospitality industry in Ghana.

I would like to ask you a few questions that are important for this study. Your insights will help me better understand how customer service reviews and ratings impact brand perception and purchasing decisions.

I will be leading today’s discussion and my role is to guide the conversation, keep us on schedule, and ensure you have the opportunity to share your knowledge and experience. Additionally, I will audio-record the session to make sure I capture your responses accurately. This interview will take approximately 30 to 45 minutes.

To ensure confidentiality, I will not use your name, address, or any identifying information in this study. Your responses will be kept strictly confidential, and no information that could identify you will be shared.

Participation in this research is completely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from the interview at any time without any consequences. Before we start, I would like you to confirm your participation by answering Yes or No. This will serve as my record that you have agreed to participate, consent to the recording, and understand that all information will be kept confidential.

.....

Name

Signature

Date